

**PRINCES RISBOROUGH UPPER SCHOOL, MERTON ROAD,  
PRINCES RISBOROUGH**

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION**

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## **Summary**

Six evaluation trenches were excavated in advance of proposed development at Princes Risborough Upper School (NGR 481100 203000). Five of these trenches were in the area currently used as playing fields, with one trench in the school grounds proper. Although the area is one of high archaeological potential, with a high concentration of prehistoric sites in the vicinity, no significant archaeological remains were detected in any of the trenches. Trench 1 contained a shallow ditch of uncertain date, but it appears highly unlikely that this is a feature of any archaeological importance. The remaining trenches contained no archaeological material whatsoever, and there is no evidence of significant archaeological activity from the evaluated sample of the area.

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**ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION**

**1. INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1** It is proposed to construct a new coach access to the north of the existing Princes Risborough Upper School. The Site lies in an area of archaeological potential and The Local Planning Authority was advised by the Senior Archaeological Officer with Buckinghamshire County Council (as the provider of archaeological advice to the LPA) that as a part of the planning process and in line with Planning Policy Guidance Note 16, archaeological work was required in advance of development.
- 1.2** Wessex Archaeology were requested by Babbie Group multidisciplinary consultants on behalf of Buckinghamshire County Council, to carry out a field evaluation to investigate the area (hereafter referred to as “the Site”) (Figure 1).
- 1.3** A Brief for the archaeological field evaluation was produced by Buckinghamshire County Council, outlining a programme of works designed to evaluate any surviving archaeological deposits likely to be affected by this development. This would enable the Senior Archaeological Officer with Buckinghamshire County Council (as the provider of archaeological advice to the LPA) to make recommendations on any mitigation strategy necessary to deal with those deposits. This report details the results of that evaluation.

**2. THE SITE**

- 2.1** The Site comprises three principal areas of which two are available for evaluation. The proposed access runs south from New Road across school playing fields (the route appears to run to the west of football pitches). Where the proposed route turns west within an arable field and crosses the Upper Icknield Way there are overhead power lines which render parts of the area unavailable for plant operations. To the west of the Upper Icknield Way a coach turning area is proposed within the school grounds.

**3. ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

- 3.1** The site is located on a low chalk spur projecting from the Chiltern scarp at the mouth of the Saunderton Gap (NGR 481100 203000). The proposed access runs parallel to the lane now designated Upper Icknield Way. This is presumed to follow the route of the prehistoric trackway, also known as the Icknield Way or Ridgeway, which begins in East Anglia and runs southwest as far as Wiltshire. The exact date of the trackway is uncertain, but it was almost certainly in use by the later Neolithic period, around 2400BC (Rackham 1986). The surrounding area is a known focus for prehistoric remains; a Neolithic

crouched burial was discovered in 1983, 200m to the southwest of the school in Clifford Road, and the area around Risborough contains many Neolithic burial-mounds or barrows. Scheduled groups of these are recorded at Lodge Hill and Saunderton Station, to the southwest of the evaluation area, and also at Whiteleaf Hill, approximately 1km to the northeast along the line of the Icknield way. The Whiteleaf Hill group consists of one ovoid barrow of Neolithic date which "...was excavated in 1934-9, revealing post-holes suggestive of a burial chamber," (Macfarlane and Kingham, 1997), with two smaller round-barrows to the north, thought to be of an early Bronze Age date (Fig. 1). These barrows are located immediately above the Whiteleaf Cross; a prominent feature of the Risborough landscape, this chalk figure is impressive in size (being some 80m long) but apparently of relatively recent date – the earliest references to it date from the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century.

- 3.2 Prehistoric and Roman finds have been recorded at Risborough Cop to the east of the Site. A Roman villa, Saxon cemetery and medieval moats are recorded at Saunderton, to the southwest of the site. Monks and Princes Risborough became important medieval settlements and the parish boundary of Monks Risborough was detailed in an Anglo-Saxon charter in AD 903.
- 3.3 No remains of archaeological significance have previously been detected in or immediately adjacent to the current evaluation area.

#### **4. RESEARCH DESIGN**

- 4.1 The objectives of the evaluation were to determine, as far as reasonably possible, the presence/absence, location, nature, extent, date, quality, condition and significance of any surviving archaeological deposits within the area of the site to facilitate judgements on the status of the archaeological resource and allow the formulation of an appropriate response ('a mitigation strategy') to the impact of the proposed development on surviving archaeological deposits.
- 4.2 The project archive will be prepared for preservation in an accessible and usable form and arrangements will be made for its long-term storage in the appropriate registered museum.

#### **5. METHOD STATEMENT**

- 5.1 Six trenches were excavated in total. Five of these were in the playing fields to the south of the school grounds; of these three measured 30m by 1.6m and two measured 10m by 1.6m. The sixth trench was located in the southeast corner of the school grounds proper, adjacent to the Princes Risborough Youth Centre, and measured 20m by 1.6m. The depth of these trenches was not to exceed 1.2m; in the event, no trench exceeded 0.7m in depth.
- 5.2 All trenches were mechanically excavated by means of a JCB excavator using a toothless (ditching) bucket, under the constant supervision of an experienced archaeologist. If significant archaeological remains were encountered extra trenches were to be excavated or existing trenches extended, in order to

investigate the nature and limits etc. of the areas of archaeological potential. No extra trenches were deemed necessary.

- 5.3 All exposed archaeological features and/or deposits were excavated by hand. Such sampling is designed to be minimally intrusive, with the aim of recovering sufficient information to determine date, nature and deposit quality without compromising the archaeological value of the deposits. All significant finds were retained, processed and stored temporarily at the offices of Wessex archaeology in Salisbury.
- 5.4 Trench locations, levels and OS data were established using a total station theodolite, and all survey information is stored in digital format.
- 5.5 All trenches were backfilled upon completion of fieldwork. Subsoils and topsoils were reinstated in their original order and compacted as best as possible using the mechanical excavator.

## 6. RESULTS

- 6.1 Context descriptions are presented in tabulated form in **Appendix 1**. Trench locations are shown in Figure 2.
- 6.2 The natural geology consisted of chalk bedrock capped by shattered chalk (probably a result of modern ploughing dated by the presence of brick fragments). A layer of old ploughsoil between the chalk and the present topsoil was observed at a depth of between 0.32 – 0.49m, containing between 10 and 35% chalk inclusions, in addition to modern brick fragments. The present topsoil overlying this remained consistent across the site, being a pale greyish-brown silty loam varying in depth between between 0.10 and 0.35m.

### 6.3 Archaeological Results

- 6.3.1 Trench 1 was the only trench to contain archaeological remains. These consisted of a broad, shallow ditch sealed by the old ploughsoil and cut into the chalk, measuring 1.4m wide by 0.29m deep. The ditch ran on a northwest to southeast alignment, and was filled with several layers of silty loam very similar in nature to the old ploughsoil. The ditch fill deposit 104 contained two fragments of animal bone, one of which was identified as being the first phalange (toe-bone) of a cow. The function and date of this ditch are uncertain, but the fact that it appears to have escaped serious disturbance by ploughing would argue against its being of great antiquity; it may be the remains of a recent, disused drainage channel. The possibility of its being of prehistoric date, however, cannot be entirely discounted. As discussed above, the general area is rich in prehistoric remains and the ditch may represent part of a highly-eroded field system, although this seems unlikely given the shallow depth – and the ditch cuts the surface of the chalk which appears to have been shattered by modern ploughing.
- 6.3.2 The remainder of the trenches in this area, trenches 2 to 5 inclusive, contained no evidence of significant archaeological remains.

**6.3.3** Trench 6, excavated within the school grounds, was also devoid of archaeological deposits.

**6.3.4** The area of arable land in the southwest part of the Site was not investigated. This was due to a combination of factors – firstly access to the field was made hazardous by the presence of high-voltage overhead cables; secondly, the heavily waterlogged soil made it impracticable to track plant across the field; and finally the results from trenches 5 and 6 made it highly unlikely that archaeologically significant material would be detected. It was therefore decided, with the agreement of Mr. Kidd of the Buckinghamshire County Archaeological Service and Ms. Rowe of Babtie, that excavation of a further trench was unnecessary.

## **7. DISCUSSION**

### **7.1 General**

7.1.1 The evaluation of the area to the south of Princes Risborough Upper School located evidence of only one archaeological feature of (ditch **103**) and this did not appear to be a feature of any great importance. No archaeologically significant features or material were present to the west of this ditch, and the evaluation area appears devoid of archaeological activity.

## **8. CONFIDENCE RATING**

8.1 Weather conditions during the evaluation varied between bright sunshine and heavy rain during the fieldwork, but in general conditions were good. All trenches were carefully examined during both the initial machining and the subsequent cleaning and recording process, and topsoil and subsoil removed mechanically was scanned for finds. It is highly unlikely that any features of archaeological significance were overlooked.

## **9. CONCLUSIONS**

9.1 No significant archaeological activity was located within the evaluation area. Although the surrounding area is rich in archaeological sites, there is no evidence of significant archaeological features or deposits within the evaluated area.

## **10. REFERENCES**

- Heppe, L. and Dogget, A.1994, *The Chilterns*, Philimore & Co.  
Macfarlane, S. and Kingham, C. 1997, *Princes Risborough Past*, Philimore & Co.  
Rackham, O. 1986, *The History of the Countryside*, J.M. Dent

<b>Trench 1</b>		
Maximum dimensions	30m long, 1.6m wide	
Surface Height 143.498m OD		
<b>Context</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Thickness</b>
100	Topsoil – mid greyish brown silty loam with sparse chalk inclusions.	0 -0.10m
101	Subsoil. Dark grey-brown silt with 5% chalk inclusions	0.1-0.35m
102	Natural chalk – grey-white nodules 0.05m across	0.35- 0.05m+
103	SE-NW ditch cut, 1.20m wide, length unknown	0.31m
104	Basal fill of ditch – mid grey-brown silty loam	0.10m
105	Upper fill of ditch - mid grey-brown silty loam	0.08m
106	Ditch fill – similar to 105	0.06m
107	Ditch fill – similar to 105	0.16m
108	Ditch fill – similar to 105	0.09

<b>Trench 2</b>		
Maximum dimensions	10m long, 1.6m wide	
Surface Height 143.565m OD		
<b>Context</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Thickness</b>
200	Topsoil - mid greyish silt clay loam.	0.35m
201	Subsoil -grey-brown silt loam with chalk inclusions	0.35- 0.49m
202	Compacted chalk natural	0.49m+

<b>Trench 3</b>		
Maximum dimensions	30m long, 1.6m wide	
Surface Height 144.057m OD		
<b>Context</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Thickness</b>
300	Topsoil. – mid greyish brown silty loam with 5% chalk and modern brick fragments	0-0.21m
301	Pale grey brown silty loam with 25% chalk fragments – subsoil	0.21- 0.56m
302	Compacted chalk with pockets of silt loam similar to 301 – natural	0.56m+

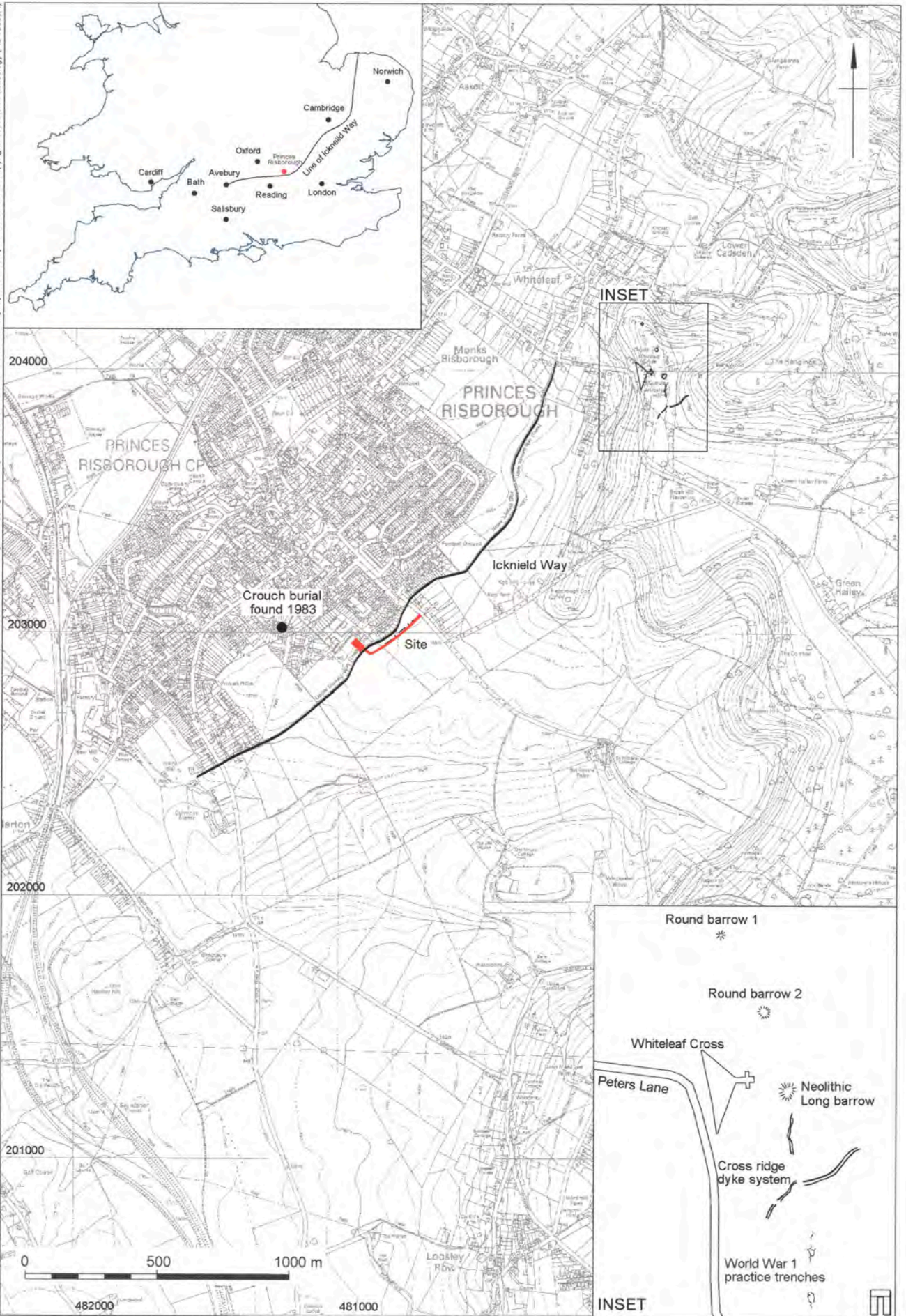
<b>Trench 4</b>		
Maximum dimensions	10m long, 1.6m wide	
Surface Height 144.152m OD		
<b>Context</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Thickness</b>
400	Topsoil. – mid greyish brown silty loam.	0-0.22m
401	Subsoil – pale grey brown silt loam 15% chalk flecks	0.22-0.38
402	Compacted chalk with small pockets of silt loam	0.38m+

<b>Trench 5</b>		
Maximum dimensions	30m long, 1.6m wide	
Surface Height 143.505m OD		
<b>Context</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Thickness</b>
500	Topsoil. – mid greyish brown silty loam with 3% chalk	0-0.24m
501	Pale grey-brown silt loam with 10% chalk- subsoil	0.24-0.40
502	Compacted chalk – natural	0.40m+

<b>Trench 6</b>		
Maximum dimensions	20m long, 1.6m wide	
Surface Height 138.905m OD		
<b>Context</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Thickness</b>
600	Topsoil. – mid greyish brown silty loam with 3% chalk	0-0.20m
601	Pale grey-brown silt loam with 10% chalk- subsoil	0.20 – 0.32m
602	Compacted chalk – natural	0.32m+

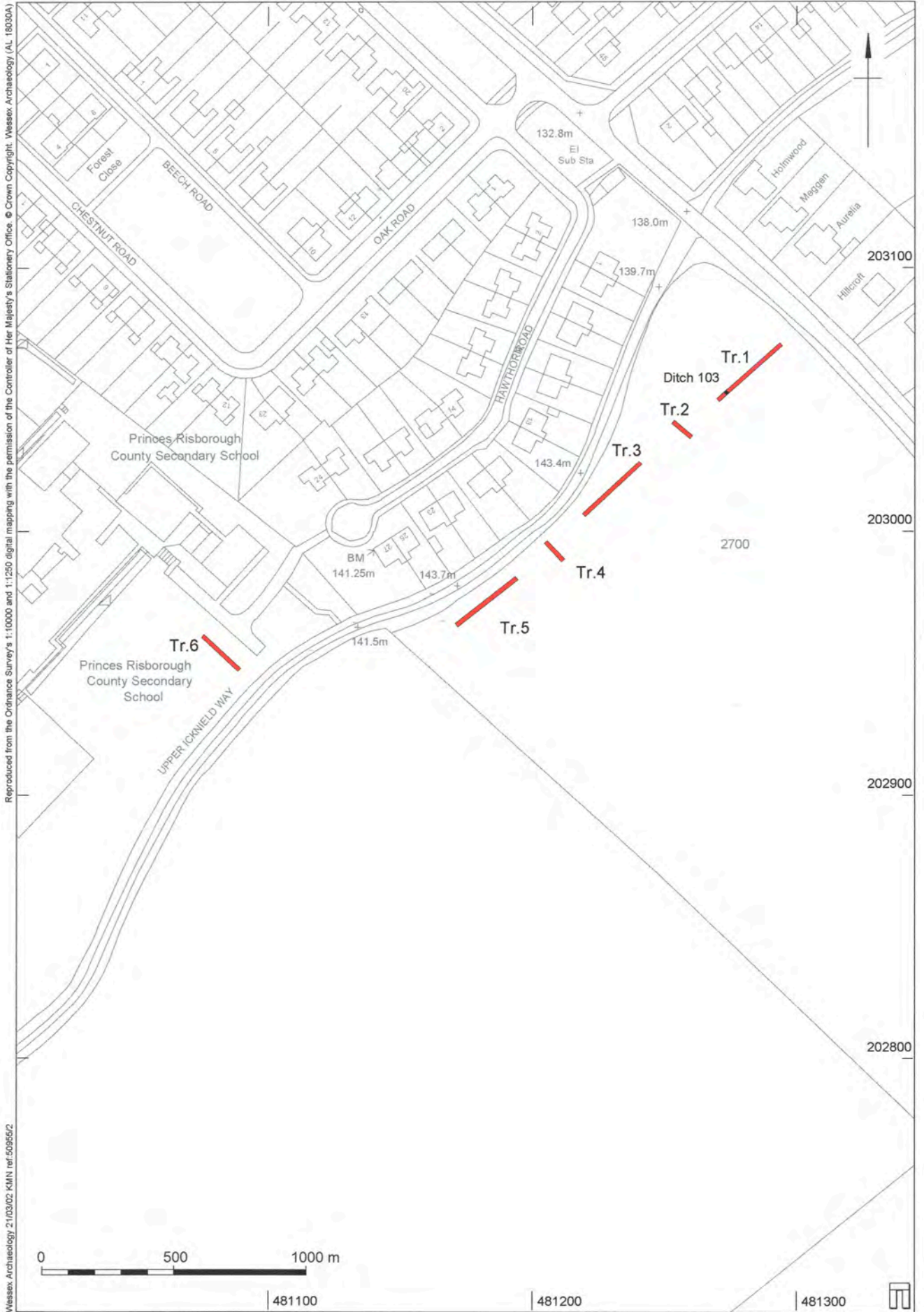


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Site location plan

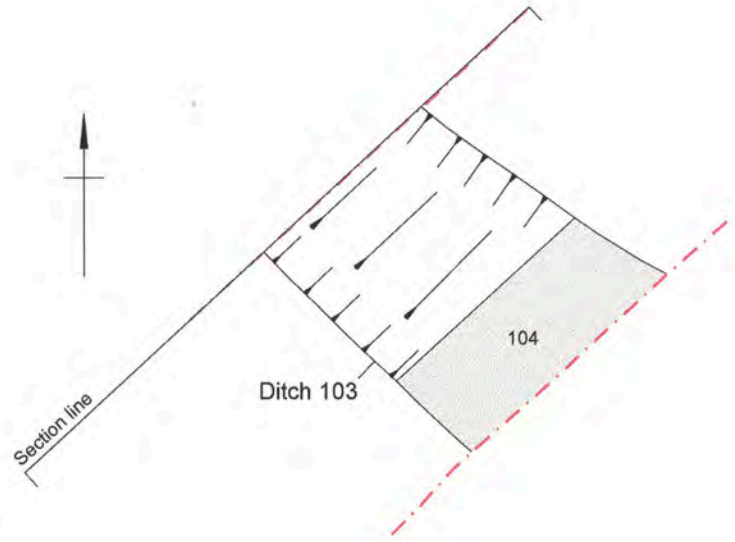
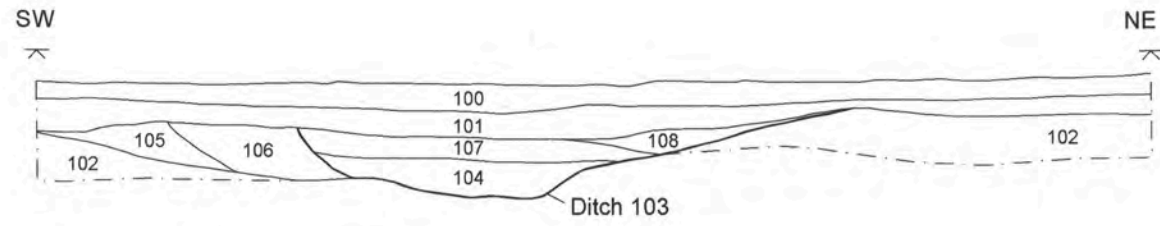
Figure 1



Trench layout plan

Figure 2

Trench 1



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Ditch plan and section



Figure 3